

NEWS FROM ED MARKEY

United States Congress

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Markey Blasts Nuke Pill Guidelines

Bush Administration Ignores Bioterrorism Bill Directives

Washington, DC: Congressman Edward J. Markey (D-MA) a senior Member of the House Energy and Commerce and Homeland Security Committees, today released a letter sent to Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tommy Thompson regarding the Department's failure to draft adequate guidelines for the stockpiling and distribution of potassium iodide (KI) tablets, which can protect the public against the adverse health impacts associated with exposure to radioactive iodine in the event of an attack on or an accident at a nuclear power plant. Rep. Markey authored Section 127 of the 2002 Bioterrorism Act, which directed the President to establish a program to make KI available to State and local governments for distribution to all persons living within a 20 mile radius of a nuclear power plant. Previously, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) made KI available only to State governments for distribution to persons living within a 10 mile radius of such plants, and only when the States requested it.

"Without significant revision, the Department's guidelines will fail to follow the law," said Rep. Markey. "They need to go back to the drawing board, and this time they need to do their homework and talk to the experts who have studied this issue as well as the local governments who will need to get the medication to the communities who need it."

The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor demonstrated that children and infants are disproportionately at risk for thyroid cancer from exposure to radioactive iodine. Chernobyl resulted in thousands of children developing thyroid cancer and other thyroid disorders from exposure to radioactive iodine. By contrast, Poland quickly administered KI, and no cases of thyroid cancer were found in those given KI, and follow-up studies of these individuals have found no significant long-term health effects. The Markey amendment to the Bioterrorism Act called for a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) study of the most effective and safe way to distribute and administer potassium iodide tablets on a mass scale, followed by the development of stockpiling and distribution guidelines by the President. HHS has been delegated responsibility for administration of the KI distribution program.

Rep. Markey's letter to HHS raised concerns over the following problems with the HHS draft guidelines:

- Numerous delays have caused them to be more than a year and a half later than required by law. The Bush Administration ignored or was unable to respond to several requests for status updates.
- HHS failed to establish guidelines for the stockpiling and distribution of potassium iodide tablets as the law requires. The draft merely sets forth guidelines for "requesting" KI.
- The draft guidelines do not even mention the role potassium iodide can play in a community's response to an act of terrorism at a nuclear reactor, contain an incomplete discussion of the adverse health impacts of being exposed to radioactive iodine, and ignore conclusions and recommendations regarding the efficacy and implementation of a KI stockpiling and distribution program reached by the NAS, the FDA, the NRC, the American Thyroid Association, the American Academy of Pediatricians, the World Health Organization and those who have studied the Chernobyl accident.
- HHS failed to consult with local governments, as is required by law, and failed to provide public notice or adequate time and opportunity for public comment.

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“The threat of nuclear terrorism is real and dangerous,” said Rep. Markey. “The draft guidelines do not yet reflect the seriousness of the threat, or encourage State and local governments to take advantage of a program aimed at helping them protect the health of those living near nuclear power plants from a release of radioactive iodine.”

For a copy of the draft guidelines or Rep. Markey’s letter to HHS, please see www.house.gov/markey